Rep. Baird Seeks to Strengthen Skilled American Workforce (October 30, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird today proposed strengthening immigration rules to protect American workers and cultivate a skilled American workforce. In a letter to the House leadership, Congressman Baird suggested that American companies employing skilled foreign workers - or H1-B workers - be required by law to actively participate in education and training programs here in the U.S. to help American workers meet the increasingly high-tech, high-skilled industry demands. The full text of the Congressman's letter follows.

ï¿½American employers are currently required to pay just $1,500 for every H1-B visa application they make. Thatï¿½s not nearly enough to educate a worker or strengthen the ranks of the skilled American workforce,ï¿½ said Congressman Baird. ï¿½We can and should be doing more to keep good jobs here at home.ï¿½

The H-1B is a non-immigrant classification used by aliens who will be employed temporarily in a specialty occupation in the United States. For more information on H-1B visa status, visit http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/howdoi/h1b.htm.

Congressman Baird has been a steadfast protector of American jobs. Earlier this year, he fought an attempt by the Administration to export U.S. steel manufacturing jobs to China.

October 30, 2006

The Honorable Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable James Sensenbrenner, Chairman of the Committee on the Judiciary

The Honorable John Conyers, Ranking Member of the Committee on the Judiciary

Dear Speaker Hastert, Minority Leader Pelosi, Chairman Sensenbrenner, and Ranking Member Conyers:

As the Congressman for Washingtonï¿½s Third Congressional District, I represent a part of the country with a large number of high tech employers. I understand the challenges these companies face in meeting the need for highly-skilled workers and am generally supportive of increasing the number of H1-B visas available. However, I strongly believe that if we increase the number of H1-B visas, employers who utilize the program must demonstrate a further commitment to helping develop a skilled American workforce.

Certainly, U.S. companies need access to highly-skilled workers to compete globally. I have heard from many companies that are experiencing a shortage in the supply of the highly-skilled workers they need. These companies are understandably concerned about the impact this shortage may have on the future of their businesses. For this reason, I recognize that Congress may need to consider increasing the cap on H1-B visas in the short-term to address this shortage and ensure that U.S. businesses continue to operate in the U.S.

At the same time, however, I remain wholeheartedly committed to the belief that U.S. workers are capable of meeting the demand for highly-skilled workers in the long-term. We simply cannot ignore the fact that each H1-B visa worker hired by a U.S. employer means the loss of a potential job for a U.S. worker.

Congress must commit itself to doing more to ensure that our workforce receives the education and training that it needs to fill the positions that are currently being filled with foreign workers. I understand that, under current law, H1-B visa fees go towards important government programs to enhance math, science, and technology education and to increase the number of highly-skilled workers. Although the amount collected through H1-B visa fees is relatively modest, the program is an important one that should certainly be continued.

I believe that any increase in the number of H1-B visas should be accompanied by the imposition of new responsibilities on the companies that utilize the H1-B visa program. As a condition of participating in the H1-B visa program, Congress should require that H1-B employers be actively and directly involved in programs to increase the skill level of U.S. workers. This could be accomplished by requiring H1-B sponsors to certify that they are involved in or participating in educational programs, training programs, or mentorship programs focused on science, math, engineering, or technology. Participation could be achieved, for example, by contributing computer equipment to these sorts of programs or through the involvement of company employees in training programs for math and science teachers. The program or programs should be located in the community in which the H1-B worker is employed and should be commensurate with the size of the company and the number of H1-B workers that the employer employs.

An H1-B program that conditions receipt of H1-B visas on the direct and active participation of H1-B employers in programs that increase the skill level of the U.S. workforce would be a win for everyone. Companies will gain access to the workers that they need in the short-term and will help train the workers that they will need in the future. In addition, U.S. workers will receive the skills that they need to access quality jobs at some of the most successful companies in the world.

I appreciate your attention to this matter. If you wish to discuss this issue with me further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Brian Baird

Member of Congress

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